

AEQUANIMITAS

OFFICER AND GENTLEMAN

I don't want anyone to think that I am unduly preoccupied with sex, but I'm told that the topics which sell papers are murder, sex, and medicine, in that order. When one has a situation which combines the latter two elements even the dullest of columnists should not miss.

I had lunch recently at the Saint James's Club, Montreal, and the conversation disclosed that this ancient stronghold of masculinity once unknowingly had a woman member. She was Inspector-General James Barry, Chief Medical Officer of British Army establishments and hospitals in Canada 1857-1859. Her membership in the Club terminated with her resignation in April 1859, shortly before he or she was repatriated to the United Kingdom on medical grounds.

I was vaguely aware that this fabulous character had successfully concealed her gender during a long and distinguished military career, but I had not known previously that she had served in Canada. Starting with the short "History of the Saint James's Club",¹ I was guided to the authoritative biography "The Strange Story of Doctor James Barry"² by Isobel Rae, which forms the basis of these notes. Along the way I was interested to learn that William Osler and Charles Dickens both exhibited sufficient interest in the phenomenon to refer to Dr. Barry in their writings.

Although Barry's immediate ancestry is shrouded in mystery, he or she had influential friends in high places who aided the very bright child to a liberal classical education before she enrolled at Edinburgh University in medicine, probably at the age of 14, in the year 1809. Brought up as a boy and clothed in masculine attire, this diminutive youthful student was accepted as James Barry, the brilliant scholar who was awarded the M.D. Edinburgh in 1812 on presenting and defending a Latin thesis on Hernia of the Groin. She was undoubtedly the first woman to acquire a university medical degree in the U.K. A postgraduate year at Guy's and St. Thomas's Hospitals led to the appointment to a commission in the Army in 1813 in the grade of Hospital Assistant. Promoted to Assistant Surgeon in 1815, Staff Surgeon in 1827, Dr. Barry had an outstanding military career and attained the ultimate rank of Inspector-General of Hospitals, the equivalent of a modern Major General. Throughout her 46 years of active service, mostly spent in tropical stations, she seems to have been extraordinarily successful in avoiding physical examination, though she had a close call when she contracted yellow fever in Trinidad.

Although she was regarded as effeminate in appearance, a beardless youth among the hirsute generations of fighting men, nobody seems to have

penetrated the imposture. The writings of friends and contemporaries after her death had revealed her sex, disclose that they had their suspicions, but this appeals to me as *post hoc* reasoning and the exercise of hindsight.

Dr. Barry is described as belligerent in manner, waspish in temper, a fiery M.O. who tangled with authority and, when it suited her purpose, disregarded the established channels of communication. She emerged unscathed from two duels and two courts martial which bolstered her self-assurance, encouraged a certain flamboyance in dress and did nothing to subdue a fiery temper and a touchy attitude. Witty and cultured, she delighted in high society.

She was a good doctor, considerably better trained than most of her contemporaries in the Army, intolerant of cruelty and oppression, an ardent advocate of cleanliness and temperance and a pioneer in dietary reform of the rations of the troops. On her first posting abroad she spent 12 years, 1816-1828, in the Cape Colony struggling with epidemic disease, enhancing her professional competence and raising hell with the colonial officials. Two incidents of this period attracted me in Isobel Rae's excellent account. Among the other appointments which Dr. Barry held was that of Second Member of the Vaccine Institute. This, mark you, was about 20 years after Jenner's monumental contribution, and it surprises me that such a facility existed in the remote outpost of South Africa. The second episode demonstrates surgical skill and considerable luck, because in 1819 she delivered the wife of Thomas Munnick by cesarean section and both mother and child survived. Her master at Edinburgh, Dr. James Hamilton, had performed the operation twice unsuccessfully. Gynecologists will be able to say whether a non-fatal cesarean section had been performed in Britain before 1833. In gratitude, the baby and his descendants were christened with the name James Barry, and a subsequent Prime Minister of South Africa was James Barry Munnick Hertzog.

Successive postings to Mauritius, Jamaica, St. Helena, Barbados, Trinidad, Malta and Corfu, with a leave spent in the Crimea fighting, antedated her translation to Montreal in 1857. Florence Nightingale is said to have had a hand in this appointment because she wanted the incumbent officer back home as a member of the Royal Commission on the Health of the Army. At any rate, Dr. Barry did her usual good job of jacking up the military hospitals at Quebec, Montreal, Kingston and Toronto, joined the Club, cut a social swath in Montreal and succumbed to the Canadian winter by contracting bronchitis. Dr. Ridley MacKenzie³ contributes a note about this period and identifies her medical attendant as Dr. G. W. Campbell.

Dr. Barry was invalided home in 1859, placed on half-pay and retired from active duty. Characteristically, she protested loud and long, and had some caustic things to say about the members of her Medical Board. She lived in London, a frail little figure, until she died July 15, 1865, the victim of a severe outbreak of diarrhea. Her secret was revealed by the charwoman, Sophia Bishop, who added that she must have borne a child because her abdomen showed striae gravidarum. Her attending physician did not consider the revelation of the patient's sex to be any of his business and no post-mortem examination was made. The newspapers made a big thing of the Great Impersonation, as well they might.

In a paraphrase of Isobel Rae, we'll let two Canadian doctors have the last word and point the moral:

"Dr. Barry spent two winters in Canada and suffered badly from bronchitis. She was treated for this by Dr. W. G. Campbell who was afterward Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at McGill, among whose medical students was young William Osler, who would tell of Dr. Campbell's cautionary tale to his class: 'Gentlemen,' Campbell would say, 'if I had not stood in some awe of Inspector-General Barry's rank and medical attainments I would have examined him, that is her—far more thoroughly. Because I did not and because his—confound it, her—bedroom was always in almost total darkness when I paid my calls, this, ah, crucial point escaped me. Which shows that you should never let yourself be too impressed by any colleague to treat him just like any other patient.'"

A.D.K.

REFERENCES

1. COLLARD, E. A.: *The Saint James's Club, Montreal*. Privately printed, 1957.
2. RAE, I.: *The strange story of Dr. James Barry*. Longmans Green & Co. Ltd., London, 1958.
3. MACKENZIE, R.: *Canad. Med. Ass. J.*, 21: 85, 1929.

OBITUARIES

DR. GEORGES BADEAUX, 81, for many years a member of the staff of the Hôtel-Dieu Hospital, Montreal, died in Montreal on August 4, 1967.

A member of one of the oldest families of Trois-Rivières, he graduated from the University of Montreal in 1911 and practised in Montreal with his brother, François, and his son, Jacques.

He was a former president of the Montreal Eye, Ear, Nose and Throat Society and had been associated with the Hôtel-Dieu Hospital during his entire career.

He is survived by his widow, the former Marie Denoncourt; four sons, Dr. Jacques Badeaux, Jean Badeaux, Q.C., André and Claude; two daughters, Mrs. Aline Archambault and Mrs. Louise St. Laurent; and a brother, the Hon. Pierre A. Badeaux, retired judge of the Quebec Court of Appeal.

DR. CECIL MILLER, Oshawa (Ontario) gynecologist, died in the Oshawa General Hospital on July 28, 1967.

Born in Bruce County, he was educated in Walkerton, Ontario, and Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and at the University of Toronto, from which he graduated with the class of '17. After postgraduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, he spent a short period at Bowmanville before moving to Oshawa, where he practised until his retirement in 1962.

During World War I he served overseas for two years with the British Army.

Dr. Miller was an Honorary Member of The Canadian Medical Association and a Life Member

of the Academy of Medicine, Toronto, and had received certification in obstetrics and gynecology from the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada. He was an Honorary Life Member of the Oshawa Rotary Club and a former member of the Oshawa Board of Education.

He leaves his widow and two sons, Dr. Robert K. Miller of Oshawa and John of Vancouver.

DR. DANIEL MURRAY, 91, of Tatamagouche, Nova Scotia, died at Bayhead on July 16, 1967. Familiarly known as "Dr. Dan", he had practised medicine at Tatamagouche for more than 50 years.

Born in Meadowvale, he attended Pictou Academy, where he won the first Tupper Medal. After teaching school for a time, he entered the Faculty of Medicine at Dalhousie University, from which he graduated in 1903. He later received the honorary Doctor of Laws degree from his university, as well as a Special Citizenship Award from King George V.

During World War I he served overseas with the Canadian Army Medical Corps.

Dr. Murray was made a Senior Member of The Canadian Medical Association at the Annual Meeting held in Halifax in 1950, and had served two terms as President of the Nova Scotia Medical Society.

He is survived by two sons, Dr. J. Carson of Springhill and Donald of Toronto, and two daughters, Miss Elizabeth Murray of Halifax and Mrs. Ethel Livingstone of Toronto.